



Did Your Donation Actually Reach Your Local Fire Department?

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MADISON – Professional law enforcement and firefighting associations regularly raise funds through telemarketing campaigns. If you receive a phone call on their behalf, make sure you know where your money is going. The caller might say that money is being raised to support local departments, but that does not necessarily include your town's services.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) recommends that consumers looking to support their local departments do their due diligence to make sure their donation will actually reach their expected destination.

"The money generated by these campaigns is legitimate and does benefit a not-for-profit group, but the confusion for consumers lies in the wording of the sales pitch," said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. "If consumers intend for their local department to receive a share of the donations, they need to ask the solicitor where the money will be spent before they cut a check."

In one example of this miscommunication, Middleton Fire Chief Aaron Harris reported to DATCP that he had heard from a number of Middleton residents who contributed through a recent phone solicitation campaign, believing that they were supporting their local operations. As a volunteer department, the Middleton Fire Department is not a member of the professional firefighters organization that is soliciting donations and does not benefit from the campaign.

"I imagine that volunteer fire departments across Wisconsin share our same frustrations with the confusion surrounding these phone solicitations," said Chief Harris. "While we certainly appreciate the generosity of our community on behalf of our agency, the truth is that we do not raise any revenue from these donations."

The Consumer Protection Bureau offers the following recommendations for consumers who are considering making a donation:

- If you have questions about whether or not your local department will receive a share of the raised funds, simply ask – the solicitor is required by law to disclose this information.
- Professional fundraising businesses are often hired to manage the phone solicitations and can keep a significant portion of the donations, so you may also wish to ask how the collected funds will be distributed.
- If you do ask operational questions of the solicitor, watch for hesitation or uncertainty. Be suspicious if the caller is unable or unwilling to disclose this basic information.

"Donations are appreciated by volunteer departments and greatly help their operations, but they have to actually reach the station to do any good," added Chalmers. "If you wish to donate to your local department, give in person at the station or call the department directly and ask about their next fundraising event."

For more information or to file a consumer complaint, visit Consumer Protection's website at datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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